

**An Introduction to the Study of the Bible**  
Notes Compiled by Ronald L. Farmer  
The Irvin C. and Edy Chapman Dean of the Wallace All Faiths Chapel Chair  
and  
Associate Professor of Religious Studies  
Chapman University

---

**I. Metaphor One: The Three “Worlds” of the Bible**

In a broad sense, one can speak of three complementary approaches to the study of the Bible: the literary, the historical, and the contemporary. Although they are interrelated, they can be pursued somewhat independently of one another as separate spheres or “worlds.”

**A. The Literary World**

This approach deals with “the world of the biblical text itself, apart from anything outside the text. . . . the world created by the stories, songs, sayings, letters, and other literature that comprise the Bible. In looking at the literary world we are setting aside questions of references in the text to the world of events, situations, or things outside the literature. Instead, we are looking for the way in which the language of biblical texts creates unique worlds of meaning” (Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young, *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey Into Three Worlds*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2).

Note: This approach views a text as a mirror reflecting universal human experiences.

**B. The Historical World**

“In the Bible there are numerous references to the world outside the text. And it was composed in, and became part of, history. Because the Bible is historical and because it can be interpreted in terms of the historical contexts in which it came into being and developed, we can speak of a *historical world*. By historical world we mean the events and situations that form contexts for understanding the Bible as it was being written and interpreted” (Hauer and Young, 2).

Note: This approach views a text as a window to the past.

**C. The Contemporary World**

“There is more to a study of the Bible than simply describing the literary and historical worlds. The first two worlds imply a third—the *contemporary world* of the Bible. None of us reads the Bible as a totally neutral observer. We are interested to varying degrees not only in what the Bible meant, but also in what it

means today. To focus on the contemporary world of the Bible is to be sensitive to its impact on people and situations today. It is also to raise the personal question of its relevance to an individual . . . In one sense there are as many contemporary worlds of the Bible as there are readers. In another sense each age has its own unique set of questions and approaches to determining what the Bible means” (Hauer and Young, 2-3).

## II. Metaphor Two: Toolbox and Glasses

- A. Just as a carpenter has a toolbox filled with tools to perform a variety of tasks, so too the interpreter of the Bible has a toolbox filled with tools to assist in the reading process. And just as a carpenter’s toolbox has trays to organize the various tools, so too the biblical interpreter’s toolbox has two trays. One tray holds literary “tools”; the other, historical “tools.” A screwdriver, a hammer, and a wrench enable a carpenter to accomplish different tasks; likewise, the different historical and literary tools enable the interpreter to discern different facets of a text’s meaning.
- B. All interpreters approach the Bible with certain “presuppositions” or “assumptions” (either consciously or unconsciously held) that determine the meaning they are able to see when they read a text. Metaphorically speaking, all interpreters wear “glasses.” What is important to note is that no one has glasses with clear lenses. On the contrary, every interpreter reads looking through “tinted lenses.” Moreover, no two interpreters wear glasses with exactly the same tint because the tint is the result of the experiences each interpreter has had. To the degree that two interpreters have had similar experiences, they will have a similar tint to their glasses; to the degree they have had different experiences, their respective tints will differ. Because interpreters wear glasses with lenses in a variety of tints, they will inevitably see different things as they use the historical and literary tools.
- C. Thus, it is not enough simply to learn to use the various tools at one’s disposal. One must also become aware of the tint in one’s glasses—and the tint in the glasses of other interpreters.

## III. Important Definitions

### A. Exegesis

Exegesis is the English transliteration of the noun form of the Greek verb *exegeomai*, which means “to lead out of.” As a technical term applied to texts, exegesis means the “leading or reading out” of meaning. Thus, it refers to “interpretation” or “explanation.”

## B. Eisegesis

Eisegesis is the English transliteration of the noun form of the Greek verb *eisegeomai*, which means “to lead into.” As a technical term applied to texts, eisegesis means the “leading or reading in” of meaning. Although gross eisegesis is to be avoided, one should acknowledge that a reader does not “emerge” from a text with a meaning gathered exclusively from within, like pulling something out of a bag. The reader must first “get into” the text by means of questions that are not always those of the author. Thus, to some degree, eisegesis is inevitable.

## C. Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the English transliteration of *hermeneia*, the noun form of the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, “to interpret.” Broadly speaking, hermeneutics is concerned with how people come to understanding, how they create meaning. When applied to literature, the concern is how a reader understands a text and derives meaning from it.

# IV. The Literary Study of the Bible

## A. Introduction

1. Assumption—The assumption of the literary study of the Bible is that biblical texts, like all texts, create unique worlds of meaning through their unique use of language.
2. Goal—The goal of this approach is to understand the meaning of the text itself, apart from anything outside it. The goal is to recreate through careful description the dynamics of this literary world. (This description includes not only a text’s meaning but also how it creates meaning.)
3. Validation—The criterion for judging the results of literary study is the text itself. Is the proposed reading faithful to the text?
4. Caution—Because each interpreter reads a text from a particular point of view (that is, with particular presuppositions, at a particular point in history, and in a particular cultural setting), and because the biblical texts themselves are rich and multifaceted (as is the case with all good literature), there are numerous possible readings of a text. (There is no one correct reading.)

## B. Major forms of literary study (“tools”)

Note: The various forms of study are called “criticisms.” In academic circles the word criticism, derived from a Greek word meaning “to judge, to discern,” refers

to the exercise of rational analysis in evaluating something. The word does not connote fault-finding or unfavorable judgment.

1. **Formal/rhetorical criticism**—For the past several decades many biblical scholars have adapted the principles of this twentieth-century school of literary analysis. The goal is to describe those literary qualities that make each text unique, that describe how it creates meaning. The emphasis is placed on the use of literary techniques (e.g., key words, themes, motifs, and structural patterns) and literary devices (e.g., metaphors, hyperbole, and irony).
2. **Narrative criticism**—This form of study is based on the fact that in addition to “real” authors and readers, many texts use the voice of “implied narrators/authors” speaking to “implied narratees/readers.” Special attention is given to such features as characterization, setting, and plot in the construction of a “narrative world” wherein the text’s meaning is said to reside.
3. **Structuralism**—This method of study seeks to look beneath the “surface structures” studied by formal criticism in an attempt to analyze what are described as the “deep structures” of a text. Structuralists assume that all human activity (including the creation of literary texts) “reflects universal rules or codes, which they seek to decipher in order to understand the underlying meaning of the activity” being studied (in our case, a literary text). “These codes are expressed in binary, polar opposites” such as love/hate, life/death, light/darkness, male/female, right/left, up/down, and good/evil. By deciphering the codes in a text, structural critics seek to uncover both the universal deep structures “hidden in the text and the text’s particular symbolic universe” (Hauer and Young, 38).

## V. The Historical Study of the Bible

### A. Introduction

1. Assumption—The Bible is part of the historical world; consequently, it can be better understood when it is examined in terms of the contexts in which it came into being and through which it has passed.
2. Goal—The primary goal of this approach is to determine the original historical contexts of the biblical literature and to reconstruct the history of the biblical period: that is, to understand what a text meant when it was written; to determine who wrote it, to whom it was written, what the situation was, and so forth. A secondary goal is to understand how the Bible has been interpreted by subsequent readers.

3. Validation—The test for the historical study of a biblical text is to ask how well the reconstructed historical context suggested by the interpreter “fits” all the available evidence.
4. Caution—Interpreters sometimes describe historical contexts that the available data do not support when other readers test the proposed context. Moreover, our ability to reconstruct the past is always partial at best; there can be no claims to certainty.

## B. Major forms of historical study (“tools”)

Note: There are three types of historical study: literary history (a study of the historical development of the text itself); empirical historical reconstruction of the history of the biblical period; and the history of the interpretation of the Bible by the various Jewish and Christian communities. We will only consider the first two types of historical study in this introduction.

### 1. Literary History

Note: Most, though not all, of the biblical writings passed through the following stages: (a) an oral stage, when the biblical materials circulated orally; (b) eventually the oral traditions were written down, forming sources; (c) these written sources were later combined and edited to form the biblical documents; (d) these documents were copied by hand for centuries, which resulted in variant readings among the manuscripts; (e) also at different points in time, the various writings came to be accepted as scripture, that is, as authoritative for the different Jewish and Christian communities.

#### a. The “oral” stage

**Traditions criticism**—This approach attempts to reconstruct the development of individual traditions within existing written texts in order to discover their origin, and to trace how they were adapted as they were transmitted. This is obviously quite speculative in nature.

**Form criticism**—This approach attempts to identify the literary genre (form) of individual text units, with the goal of determining the “situation in life” in which these genres developed, especially during the oral period. The assumption is that certain social settings gave rise to certain literary forms.

#### b. The “written source” stage

**Source criticism**—This approach attempts to identify or reconstruct the various written sources that were used in writing the existing books of the Bible.

- c. The “editing of oral traditions, written sources, and earlier versions of biblical books into their final written version” stage

**Redaction criticism**—This approach attempts to understand how and why the various traditions, forms, and sources have been combined in the final written version of a biblical book. The goal is to discover the theological perspective of the final author/editor.

- d. The “transmission of the biblical books” stage

**Textual criticism**—This approach attempts to reconstruct the original text (autograph) by studying and comparing the various manuscripts known today.

- e. The “canonization” stage

**Canonical criticism**—This approach studies the biblical books in terms of their place in the collection recognized as authoritative in the different Jewish and Christian communities. The whole is considered to be more than the sum of its parts.

## 2. Empirical reconstruction of the biblical period

- a. Empirical means “based on observable and verifiable evidence.” Empirical reconstruction results in probable, never certain, conclusions. Yet because the method is “public,” the hope is that errors can be identified so that subsequent reconstruction will be a more accurate depiction of the past.
- b. Empirical reconstruction relies upon available evidence such as **historical documents** and **archaeological data**. It uses social-scientific models of understanding borrowed from the disciplines of **history**, **anthropology**, **sociology**, and **social psychology**.

## VI. The Contemporary Use of the Bible

### A. Introduction

- 1. Assumption—The Bible has had and continues to have an impact on the contemporary world.
- 2. Goal—The goal is to discover the impact of the Bible on the contemporary world both descriptively (the impact it has had) and normatively (the impact it should have).

3. Validation—“In a free society, each reader has the right to his or her own understanding of the impact of a biblical text.” Yet in a society “that promotes the open pursuit of truth, each of us has a responsibility to subject our interpretations to the scrutiny of other readers,” especially those within our own “community” (Hauer and Young, 37).
4. Caution—Different readers make different uses of the Bible (see B.2. below). The “evaluation of claims about the contemporary world of the Bible is challenging and must be done carefully and respectfully” (Hauer and Young 37).

## **B. Major contemporary approaches to the Bible (“glasses”)**

### **1. Common assumptions about the Bible**

- a. Note: When a writing becomes sacred or privileged, it is hard to deal with it dispassionately. Believers and unbelievers bring to the text a wealth of unusual emotions, attitudes, and assumptions (some unconsciously held). To attempt to study it as objectively as possible (there is no such thing as complete objectivity) calls for special discipline. Ideally, one approaches all sacred writings with a willingness to appreciate the religious insights they offer *and* to recognize their connection with the particular culture and historical situation out of which they grew. (Note: Openness is not the same as credulity. To allow a religious writing to present its message, to entertain its assumptions, is not the same as giving it a blank check. A religious writing does not express the world’s highest wisdom just because followers of that religion say it does. People are not required to abandon their critical reason in order to study religious writings or to be devout.)
- b. Terminology

Part of the confusion that results when Jews and Christians talk about the Bible is the ambiguity of the terms used. The following are generally accepted definitions of key terms. One should not assume that all Christians and Jews hold all of these assumptions or understand the terms the same way. (Note the use of the qualifiers “some,” “many,” and “most.”)

#### 1) Scripture

Derived from the Latin *scriptum*, the word means “writings.” As a technical term it refers to authoritative religious writings. One should not automatically equate it with the Bible because there are Buddhist Scriptures, Islamic Scriptures, and so forth.

## 2) Bible

From the Greek *biblia*, the word means “written pages, books.” As a technical term it refers to *the* book containing a group’s Scripture.

Note: The contents of the Bible differ according to one’s tradition—e.g., Protestant, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jew.

## 3) Inspiration

Literally, the term means “a breathing into.” As a technical term it refers to the divine impulse (the Holy Spirit) that stimulates and enables a person to accomplish a task. Some believers restrict the term to the divine impulse and guidance that resulted in the biblical writings. Others apply the term to such things as decisions of church councils, the preaching of sermons, the composition of hymns, and so forth.

Some hold a “mechanical” theory of inspiration—a form of dictation in which the human author is a passive recorder (“typewriter”) of God’s revelation. This theory is based upon deductive logic; it begins with an assumption about how God “must” work and derives a theory as to how the Bible “must” have come into being.

Others hold a more “dynamic” theory—the personalities and backgrounds of the human authors entered into their writings. The process of inspiration was “loose enough” to include the gathering of information, the investigation of documents, the arrangement of material, the choice of words, and every other “human” factor that normally goes into the production of a literary work. This theory is based on inductive logic; it begins by looking at the Bible and develops a theory as to how the Bible came into being.

## 4) Revelation

Revelation means “disclosure,” the act of making known what is obscure or hidden. For Jews and Christians, God is the author of revelation; in fact, revelation is the self-disclosure of God and the divine will. “The Bible is revelation” can be understood in different ways. In one sense, the Bible is a *record* of past revelation. Viewed another way, the Bible is God’s revelation only in a derivative sense, that is, when it serves as the *means* through which the divine self-disclosure occurs to the reader. (Note: Neither Jews nor Christians limit the revelation of God to the Bible.)

### 5) The Accomodation of Revelation

Most Jews and Christians believe that God's self-revelation to humanity necessitates accomodation. The finite human mind cannot assimilate the revelation of an infinite God. In a sense, then, all revelation must be anthropomorphic, and all religious language must be analogical.

Moreover, most believe that the revelation of God has come to certain people, at certain times in history, living in certain cultures, and who spoke certain languages. This revelation, therefore, reflects the personalities, histories, cultures, and languages of the various biblical authors.

### 6) The Progressive Nature of Revelation

Most Christians believe that the Bible sets forth a divine movement in which God brings humanity from theological infancy to greater and greater maturity. Thus, within the Bible itself there is religious development.

This assumption does not mean that Christians believe that revelation moved from false to true; rather, they believe that the end was implicit in the beginning, just as a rose progresses from seed to bud to full flower. Likewise, they do not believe that there are no mature ideas in the Hebrew Bible, or simple ideas in the New Testament; rather, this assumption speaks of the general pattern of revelation.

This assumption is important for most Christian exegetes. (a) They expect a fuller revelation of God in the New Testament but do not overlook the revelation of God in the Hebrew Bible. (b) When interpreting a passage, they keep in mind the place the passage occupies in the process of revelation. (c) They do not force New Testament concepts into the Hebrew Bible or fail to consider New Testament concepts in light of their connection with and development through the Hebrew Bible.

### 7) Word of God

This term refers both to God's self-disclosure and to the means through which God accomplishes divine purposes (e.g., God created through the word and recreates through the word [Christ]). Again, "the Bible is the word of God" can be understood in different ways. In one sense, the Bible is a *record* of past experiences of God's self-communication or accomplishments. Viewed another way, the Bible

is the word of God only in a derivative sense, that is, when it serves as a *means* through which God speaks to a reader or accomplishes divine purposes.

#### 8) Authority

This term refers to the demonstrable trustworthiness of a thing or a person; moreover, an authority is capable of convincing a person of truth or of causing a person to accept a command. For Jews and Christians, authority belongs ultimately to God. The Bible has authority only to the extent that it is the revealed word of God (see above definitions).

#### 9) Literal

The term means that a document contains no figurative expressions. Few people who claim to read the Bible literally really mean that. Usually they mean they believe that the Bible is inerrant. (Inerrantists do, however, take *much* of the Bible literally that others believe should be interpreted figuratively.)

#### 10) Inerrant/Infallible

This term means that there are no errors whatsoever in anything the Bible says. For example, when the Bible makes a statement in the area of science (or history, etc.), it is literally accurate. This approach to the Bible “presupposes that religious insights are somehow validated if they can be shown to have a basis in actual historical occurrences. Conversely, to cast doubt on the historicity of any element in the biblical text is to undermine its religious authority or significance” (Stephen L. Harris, *The New Testament: A Student’s Introduction*, 51). Many Christians and Jews disagree with this “positivist” presupposition regarding the nature of truth.

#### 11) Truth

This is a slippery word. To answer the question, “Is the Bible true?” one needs to consider two dimensions of truth:

*Referential Truth*—Something is true when it refers to something in the “real world” that can be verified empirically.

*Symbolic Truth*—Something is true when it sheds light on the fundamental questions about the meaning of life. These truths may or may not be empirically verifiable.

c. Faith and biblical criticism

- 1) Most serious students of the Bible question the adequacy of literalist and inerrantist presuppositions; rather, they find the general presuppositions underlying “biblical criticism” to be more useful in understanding biblical texts.
- 2) “The word *criticism* may awaken negative feelings in some people—perhaps implying fault finding or unfavorable judgment—but in biblical study it is a positive means of understanding scriptural texts more accurately and objectively. *Criticism* derives from the Greek word *krino*, which means ‘to judge’ or ‘to discern,’ to exercise rational analysis in evaluating something” (Harris 52). [The major methods of critical analysis were introduced in the above discussions of the literary and historical study of the Bible. A few more will be introduced below.]
- 3) The use of biblical criticism does not necessarily imply that one questions the religious value of the Bible. Although some scholars are content merely to understand a document in its original context (as reconstructed by the various historical-critical methodologies), the interpretative process can go beyond this “descriptive” historical approach to include the significance of the text for today’s reader (a “normative” approach).

**2. Different people make different uses of the Bible. The following are some of the major uses.**

- a. Theological—This is “the derivation of authoritative religious teaching from a text” (Hauer and Young, 57). This use is intellectual in nature.
- b. Devotional—This is the attempt to lead an individual or group to some religious experience or insight. This use is personal and experiential in nature.
- c. Ethical—This is the use of the Bible for ethical guidance. The Bible contains a number of direct ethical guidelines as well as indirect implications that can assist ethical decision-making.
- d. Liturgical—This is the use of the Bible in worship. Biblical texts may serve to “recreate” or “anticipate” an event or experience.
- e. Political—Interpreters may appeal to the Bible “to support a particular action by, for, or against governing authority” (Hauer and Young, 57-58).

### 3. Major methods for the contemporary theological and ethical appropriation of the Bible

The following methods stress the role of the reader in determining the meaning of texts. Because these methodologies are *self-consciously* based upon specific ideologies (that is, a set of ideas to which a person is committed), many contemporary interpreters no longer operate under the dangerous illusion of “objective neutrality.”

- a. **Reader-response criticism**—This approach asserts that the meaning of a text is not a static “given,” located in the text itself or in its historical context, but rather that meaning emerges in the unique interaction between a text and a particular reader in a particular situation. These interpreters “emphasize the dynamics of the ‘reading experience’ and point out that readers are often required to ‘fill in the gaps’ in a text” (Hauer and Young, 55).
- b. **Liberation criticism**—This approach interprets the Bible from the standpoint of the various oppressed/marginalized groups in the world today. The Bible is said to take the side “of those who are victims of oppression and calls for their liberation”; therefore, the proper interpretation of the Bible “must emerge from and speak to the actual experiences of the weak and powerless. . . . the criterion for evaluating all readings of the Bible is *praxis* (‘action’)”; the study of the Bible must lead the interpreter to involvement in God’s work of liberation (Hauer and Young, 56). Examples include Latin American Liberation Theology and African American Theology.
- c. **Feminist criticism**—This is actually a branch of liberation criticism, but it has been so influential that it merits its own listing. These critics (male as well as female) point out that the Bible and virtually all interpretations of the Bible have, until recently, reflected the ideology of white male dominance (patriarchy). The goals of these interpreters are “exposing patriarchy in the Bible and its interpretation and finding alternatives that support the dignity and equality of women, children, and racial-ethnic minorities” (Hauer and Young, 56).
- d. **Deconstruction**—These interpreters press reader-response criticism to its limit. For example: they emphasize the ambiguity in both texts and in interpretation of texts; they argue that readers actually create their own texts in their encounters with the literature; they assert that all texts have an “excess of meaning” that continually spills over as they are read by particular readers; they feel that because most Western texts, including the Bible, are built on binary opposites (see Structuralism above) in which the first term is assumed to be superior to the second, the reader should seek to break through these oppositions by seeking out and emphasizing the

marginal element within the texts. (Note: This approach assumes a deconstructive postmodern world view.)

- e. **Process hermeneutics**—A recent hermeneutical development, this approach makes use of categories of process philosophy and theology. Process thought affirms that all things in the universe are in continual process and are internally related to one another as parts of one spiritual whole. The particular understanding of language that emerges from this world view gives promise of moving biblical interpreters beyond the impasse reached in deconstruction, although process thought shares many of deconstruction’s assumptions. Process thought also embraces many of the ideas of reader-response criticism, liberation criticism, and feminist criticism. (Note: This approach assumes a constructive postmodern world view.)

## VII. Five Common Approaches to the Bible (and Their Assessment)

### A. Concordism

1. Description: One approach that is widespread, especially in fundamentalist circles though not exclusively so, is to “take the Bible as it is”—by which these interpreters mean, interpret it literally (as a rule)—and seek “correspondences” between present situations and situations described in the Bible. When such a correspondence is found, God is considered to be speaking through the past to the present. The reader then seeks to make the present, analogous situation conform as closely as possible to the past situation.
2. Evaluation: The search for correspondence between the present situation and the Bible can be a point of departure for exploring the relevancy of the Bible for modern readers, yet in the opinion of most scholars this approach has three negative aspects. First, it limits the biblical message to situations that have a parallel in the Bible, as if God were incapable of self-revelation in any other manner. Second, it fails to recognize the historical and cultural “conditionedness” of the Bible. Consequently, it restricts the biblical message to the level of external fact, confusing “what happened” with “the *meaning* of what happened.” That is, the message is confused with its cultural garb. Third, this approach assumes a static approach to religion; the goal is to make modern life conform as closely as possible to a “golden era” in the past. This approach does not consider the possibility of an evolutionary development of spirituality, i.e., God using the past as an impetus for a trajectory of development. In summary, this approach understands the Bible as a “closed deposit”; it has already spoken its entire message.

## B. The Present Situation as Primary “Text” and the Bible as Secondary Text

1. Description: Some religious people, especially those committed to the struggle against socio-economic injustices, approach the Bible as a text no longer speaking to the present. On the contrary, the present situation is viewed as a “text,” the primary theological locus in which God speaks. When this “living word” is clear, there is no reason to read the Bible because it is a “secondary” text. In fact, the Bible is primarily used only in terms of general themes such as “liberation,” “justice,” and “love.” (Note: This approach assumes an evolutionary development of religion.)
2. Evaluation: This approach recognizes the cultural and historical conditionedness of the Bible, but (like the concordism approach) it fails to distinguish between the message and its cultural garb. The Bible is understood as a “closed deposit”; it has already spoken its entire message. The Bible is viewed as a fixed text in a cultural milieu that is no longer ours; thus, it is largely irrelevant today.

## C. Seeking the Religious “Essence” of the Text

1. Description: Many religious people, aware of the historical and cultural conditionedness of the Bible, seek to uncover the religious “essence” of a text. In this way they distinguish between a text’s meaning and its cultural garb. Although this approach has taken several different forms—seeking the “timeless truth” of a text, seeking the “existential meaning” of a text, and so forth—the element common to each form is the stripping away of a text’s “husk” in search of its “kernel.”
2. Evaluation: Although most biblical scholars agree that this approach is an improvement over the preceding two, recently many scholars have come to agree that it manifests two noteworthy weaknesses. First, one cannot discover a text’s “essence” and present it in some form *freed* of its cultural and historical trappings. One cannot “peel off layers of husk” until the essence has been laid bare. The “essence” can be discerned *only in terms* of the cultural and historical categories in which it is expressed. Granted, in theory one can distinguish between essence and cultural form, but this does not mean that the two can be separated in practice. There is no such thing as “formless content.” (One winds up peeling an onion!) Second, although this “quest for essence” approach avoids the implication that modern life must conform to a past golden era, it nevertheless assumes a somewhat static approach to religion in that it presupposes the reader will conform to the text’s essence expressed (“translated”) in terms of the reader’s world. It fails to consider a more thoroughly evolutionary approach to religion.

#### **D. The Exclusive Use of Historical-Critical Methods**

1. Description: The historical-critical exegetical methods formulated in the modern period (textual, historical, grammatical, form, tradition, and redaction criticisms) have created a new approach to the Bible. Readers can now appreciate and to a large degree reconstruct the historical and cultural milieu in which a text took shape, resulting in a better understanding of its original meaning. (Obviously, these methods underlie the second and third approaches above; a reader using the first approach may use some, though usually not all, of these methods.)
2. Evaluation: In spite of the many benefits that render these methods indispensable for a holistic reading the Bible, their exclusive use can lead to problems. For example, by exposing the way a text came into being, the attention of the reader tends to be shifted to pre-canonical stages “behind” the final text: emphasis tends to fall upon the formation of the text (its literary history) rather than upon the text itself. Or, to take another example, these methodologies tend to result in a reductionistic reading of a text by concentrating on the “historical” meaning, the meaning “intended” by the author or redactor. The focus, therefore, is upon what the text “meant.” In short, this approach results in shutting up the message of the Bible in the past.

#### **E. The Exclusive Use of Literary Criticism and Structuralist Criticism**

1. Description: Recently the language sciences have contributed new methodologies to biblical criticism. These methods focus attention on the “text itself” (as opposed to its historical and cultural context); provide new keys to assist in reading texts, especially poetic or highly symbolic texts; and seek to uncover universal structures and concerns. Moreover, these methods offer a way to escape the irrelevancy that can result from the exclusive use of the historical-critical methodology.
2. Evaluation: As helpful as these methodologies have proven, the exclusive use of literary methods also tend to be reductionistic in so far as they abstract from the “life” of a text by neglecting its literary history and its cultural milieu.

#### **F. A few guidelines to consider in developing a more satisfying hermeneutic for reading the Bible:**

1. The basic components in the hermeneutical process are: author, text, reader, and the universe of ideas and events.
2. A temporal and cultural gulf separates the biblical writers from present-day readers (to some extent this is true of all authors and readers). Moreover, readers and authors alike are conditioned by their own culture, place in

history, and personal experiences. Thus, there must be a radical historicity to the “word of God” if it is to impinge upon human lives.

3. The existence of a text presupposes another process, that of the interpretation of an event. A text originates in an experience that is interpreted (a text is an author’s interpretation of an experience). Thus, a biblical text is “sandwiched” between two existential moments or two historical poles: the original experience that the text interprets and the subsequent experience of interpreting the text.
4. All language functions *in* time; there is no language for *all* time; that is, all language is culturally and historically conditioned.) Moreover, all language is to some degree indeterminate; that is, no verbal expression is precise and unambiguous enough to refer to one and only one idea. Some language—for example, scientific language or ordinary speech—appears to be more precise or determinate than other forms of language—for example, religious language or metaphorical speech—but *all* language is relatively indeterminate. The different types of language can be located on a spectrum between two hypothetical extremes: completely determinate on one end, and completely indeterminate on the other end.
5. Rather than seeking to express (“translate”) the “essence” of an ancient text in the categories of the modern reader’s world—a hermeneutical approach that assumes a static approach to religion—one could assume an evolutionary approach to religion. Such a hermeneutical scheme would take seriously the indeterminacy of language. Some (but not all) of the ideas entertained by the author are expressed in the language of the text; yet, the language of the text can evoke ideas not entertained by the author. Ideas evoked in the current reader’s experience of reading the text, therefore, may include some of those entertained by the author, some of those evoked by the text in its original setting (and/or other settings prior to that of the current reader), and some the language of the text evokes only (or for the first time) in the setting of the current reader. Moreover, there are ideas that the text has not yet evoked in any reader’s experience but will given the opportune setting. Thus, there is a “growing edge” to the tradition associated with an author and a text.
6. Because a text is multifaceted in character and meaning, a more satisfying hermeneutical approach will make use of the rich “toolbox” of exegetical methods that have been developed for biblical studies. Unfortunately, most of the approaches discussed above (VII.A.-E.) are not methodologically inclusive.
7. A satisfying hermeneutic will be based upon a close reading and assessment of the various philosophical understandings of perception and language.